DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 736 FL 019 231

AUTHOR Nambiar, Mohana K.
TITLE Big Books for Little Readers: Works in the ESL Classroom Too.
PUB DATE 91
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *English (Second Language); Instructional Materials; Media Selection; *Picture Books; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Materials; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Big Books

ABSTRACT

Big books, magnified or enlarged versions of children's books, are recommended for use in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom. The big book approach is based on the idea that shared reading and enlarged texts support joint adult-child participation in the reading process and emphasizes reading for meaning and enjoyment rather than accurate decoding. Big books are a rich source of activities that promote reading and meet curriculum objectives, including activating prior knowledge, modelling the thinking process, tracking print, encouraging prediction skills, and providing varied linguistic and creative activities. A natural extension of using the books is having students make them in a collaborative effort. Big books have several advantages over normal-sized story books by allowing the child to see the print and focus on specific parts of the text, facilitating use of certain reading strategies (e.g., thinking aloud), promoting awareness of the conventions of print language, and being inherently interesting because of their size. Most of the big book approach can be used readily in ESL instruction, with some modification. Accuracy and English language use should be de-emphasized in favor of participation. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED333736

BIG BOOKS FOR LITTLE READERS: WORKS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM TOO

MOHANA K. NAMBIAR

LANGUAGE CENTRE

UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

MALAYSIA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Nambiar

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

FL019231

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BIG BOOKS FOR LITTLE READERS: WORKS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM TOO

Big Books are magnified or enlarged versions of children's books, usually narratives and are considered to be one of the most effective ways of getting young children involved with print (Strickland and Morrow, 1990). Largely inspired by the shared book experience of Don Holdaway (1979) in New Zealand, Big Books as a tool for early reading instruction in English has become well-established over the past years. The aim of this article is to study the Big Book approach and to see how well it can be applied to the teaching of reading in English to non-native learners of the language.

Rationale of the Approach

Research shows that there is a strong link between reading success in school and early reading experiences at home. Durkin (1966) in her study of early readers reported that the most prevalent factor among these children was that parents or others read to them from an early age. Similarly Allington (1983) who studied good and poor readers in school found that overwhelmingly the good readers were the ones who were read to at home. Shared reading between parent and child seems to be the foundation for early literacy; the Big Book approach is an extension of this concept into the classroom. Enlarged texts allow all the children in the classroom to see and react to the words and pictures on the page as the teacher reads aloud, a vital similarity to the shared reading between parent and child. In fact many teachers believe that the Big Book approach

is the closest approximation that can be offered in the classroom to the family storybook readings (Strickland and Morrow, 1990).

A number of events occur during bedtime story reading or lap reading sessions that promote early literacy. The adult models the real experience of reading and provides a situation that is socially rewarding and pleasurable to both child and parent. The child not only gains experience with handling books but also with the reading process itself. When confronted with isolated aspects of the reading process such as letter recognition, the child may sense where the skill fits in the context of the whole reading process (Combs, 1987). Also significant is the informal discussions about the stories which enrichen the child's comprehension about a variety of topics and builds up his schema or background knowledge.

Reading a favourite book over and over again has many values, not least the sensitizing of the child to the features of book language. The child learns the concepts of directionality; that spoken words correspond to written words as well as the association between words on the page and the illustration long before he actually learns to read. The method of repeated readings has also been advocated by Samuels (1979) to develop fluency. He contended that a fluent reader decodes text automatically, without conscious attention, leaving the mind free to grapple with comprehension. Concurrently Holdaway in studying the readinglike behaviour of

preschoolers realized the critical role of repetition in literacy acquisition and referred to it as " support from memory". As a mentor of the Big Book approach, Holdaway facilitated considerable gains in fluency among groups of children through repeated shared readings (Trachtenburg and Ferruggia, 1989).

Research shows that good and poor readers receive differential treatment from teachers. Allington (1983) found that with poor readers, teachers focussed on accuracy, phonic skills and constant corrections of any deviations from the printed text, no matter how close in meaning. It's no wonder then that poor readers perceived reading as accurate decoding and spend most of their class time on sub-skill activities rather than on actual reading for understanding and pleasure. In contrast, with good readers teachers tended to emphasize meaning and expression, often ignoring miscues provided these were consistent with the story. Thus teacher guidance for more proficient readers emphasized strategies that encouraged interaction with the text to develop deeper understanding. This approach in instruction has only helped to widen the gap that exists between good and poor readers in their strategies to handle print. The Big Book, by providing early experiences with print in a meaningful context, is thus seen as a way of narrowing this gap (Combs, 1987).

To sum up, the Big Book is based on a number of very sound theoretical principles. It attempts to recreate in the classroom

the secure, relaxed atmosphere of the one-to-one family storybook reading experience. This is particularly significant in a second language learning context because many of the learners do not come from homes where English is used, least of all from homes rich in 'English' print. Reading the Big Book is carried out in a non-threatening manner and ample scope for repetition is allowed since usually one to two weeks is spent on a book. The teaching strategy emphasizes reading for meaning and enjoyment rather than on accurate decoding. Students learn to read by spending maximum time on reading rather than on isolated sub-skills such as phonics or word identification.

Features of Big Books

Patterned and predictable language is a key feature of most Big Books (Strickland, 1990; Slaughter, 1983). The predictability of the language and the plot makes them easy for children to understand. The events repeat themselves and so does the pattern of language. With the aid of the illustrations and repeated readings, children, aware of the meaning of the whole story, will anticipate certain words and eventually read along with the teacher.

As mentioned earlier, the distinguishing feature of the Big Book is of course its size. It is usually about 18 to 20 inches tall and the print is at least an inch high. The size and clarity of

the print and illustrations help to ensure that all the children in the class will be able to focus on the book from a distance of at least 15 feet.

Using the Big Book in the Classroom

The Big Book is a rich source of many activities which promote reading and meet curriculum objectives (Strickland, 1988; Strickland and Morrow, 1990; Cassady, 1988). Depending on the developmental level of the students and the teaching objectives, different strategies can be used. Some of these are:

1. Activating Prior Knowledge

Before the actual reading the teacher can ask the children what they think the story is going to be about by engaging in a discussion of the title and the illustration on the cover page. The children by using clues from the text and their background knowledge are encouraged to make inferences and formulate predictions, a strategy that all proficient readers indulge in.

2. Modelling the Thinking Process

Strickland (1990) suggests that the teacher occasionally use the first reading to demonstrate how readers think when they read a text. As the teacher reads the story enthusiastically, she thinks aloud about her own understanding. She models self-queries such as, "I wonder if this story is going to be about...", "This is a little confusing but I will keep on reading to find out more", " This is a new word. Could it mean ...?" or " If I were ..., I

wouldn't do it because...". The students as they observe the teacher soon realise that reading involves bringing together what they already know with what they actually see in print, in order to construct their own meaning. This is particularly significant for the less proficient readers, many of whom think that reading is limited to accurate decoding.

3. Tracking Print

As the teacher reads aloud, she follows the text with her hand or a pointer. This ensures that the children can see exactly what the teacher is reading and they learn to associate sound to the printed symbol. In this manner, left-to-right progression and top-to-bottom concepts of print are being demonstrated within a meaningful context (Dixon, 1984). In the same vein, the teacher can introduce terms of book language such as 'word', 'sentence', 'page', 'author' and 'title' in naturally occuring contexts, e.g."I like this word because it reminds me of...".

4. Encouraging Skills of Prediction

As the teacher reads aloud, she can pause at suitable junctures to allow students to predict the words or phrases that should follow. The children will carry out the task easily and with pleasure because they have heard the words being repeatedly read and also because of the rhyming structures. Similarly at strategic points teachers can stop and ask children to predict what will happen next in the story. Besides the sense of fun and active involvement

that is encouraged, children are also being trained to use the story line to anticipate and predict.

5. Language Activities

Besides echo reading, choral reading or assisted reading, a host of language-based activities are feasible with the Big Book. It is true that as a result of repeated readings, students will be able to recognize words in context. However this is not enough; "true readers must recognize these words in isolation and in other contexts..." (Trachtenburg and Ferruggia, 1989, p. 286). The development of a sight vocabulary can be easily facilitated by the Big Book. Using a 'magic window' (a large paper rectangle with a smaller rectangle in the centre), the teacher can isolate target words and ask the children to identify the words. If a child cannot 'read' the word, the teacher merely removes the window so that the child can use the context to recognize the word (Trachtenburg and Ferruggia, 1989).

Since children retain words which are meaningful to them (Ashton-Warner, 1963), word banks can be established. Children are asked to choose one word each day from the Big Book they would like to learn. These words can then be used for many purposes. One method is to mix them together and ask the children to locate their "own" words and read them to a classmate. When an adequate number of sight words have been mastered, children can be taught to create new sentences. First the words are separated to fit categories such as adjectives, nouns, verbs and adverbs. The categorised

words are then printed on paper strips, which fit into slits in a 'sentence slotter' (Trachtenburg and Ferruggia, 1989). When the children move the strips up and down, different sentences are constructed. By discussing whether their 'new' sentences make sense, children get a better grasp of how language works.

6. Other Activities

Each child can be provided with a different photocopied illustration from the Big Book and asked to colour or write/tell what is happpening in his picture. The class can together arrange the pictures in the order in which they occurred in the story. This activity enhances the sequencing and critical thinking skills of the students, not to mention the benefits of collaborative learning. Key ideas or children's favourite parts of the text can be discussed and linked to their own experiences; dramatizations could be a natural follow-up. Finally, to encourage independent reading, the Big Book or normal-sized copies of the same story or taped versions should be made available for individual student's use.

Making Big Books

A natural extension of using the Big Books is to get the children to make them. Although Big Books are commercially available together with normal-sized copies, they are usually expensive. The

benefits of making your own Big Books are numerable. Besides the collaborative effort among students and teacher needed to produce a Big Book, the pride in the final product is considerable. There is even the possibility that children might put in more effort when the book they read is self-produced (Slaughter, 1983). The sources of the book could be children's favourite story books or poems. Stories that contain repetitive phrases and strong rhyme patterns, or simple story lines with predictable plots and easy to sound out words are obviously good guidelines for selecting material for making Big Books. Based on the Language Experience Approach (LEA), children could also relate original stories which the teacher can record on their behalf.

Usually the teacher prints the text on large sheets of thick paper/cardboard so that everyone can see clearly. Then photocopies can be made so that each child gets one page to draw and colour. As the child draws, the teacher could ask him to explain the relationship between the words on the page and the child's illustration. This, together with the class discussion of how to sequence and order the different pages of the book are excellent opportunites for enhancing critical thinking and sequencing skills. (See Cassady, 1988, on other ideas for making Big Books.)

Advantages of using the Big Book approach

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, there is little reason to

doubt the effectiveness and popularity of the Big Book as a method for beginning reading instruction. As mentioned earlier it is an extension of the bedtime story reading which besides having other values, is cherished as a tool for language and literacy development among children (Strickland, 1990). The highly predictable story line and the simple rhyme of the language encourage children to 'read' along, boosting the self-esteem of many a poor reader. Furthermore many different activities and concepts about reading can be taught in a meaningful context using the Big Book. To the young child who is just beginning to grapple with print, the Big Book allows for maximum time to be spent on actual reading rather than labouring over isolated subskills of reading. By being involved in activities that are meaningful and functional from the child's point of view, he is well set towards the goal of independent reading.

However upon reflection, one would realise that all the advantages discussed so far are not the prerogative of the Big Book alone - any normal-sized story book could achieve the same benefits, provided it is used appropriately. What then are the distinct advantages that the Big Book has over the traditional story book?
1. The bedtime reading experience usually requires a one-to-one relationship which is not feasible in a classroom full of children with a regular-sized book. By greatly enlarging the book and placing it where everyone can see, the teacher allows the children to see the print as the story is being read to them in much the

same way as they do when being read to at home.

2. As Combs (1987) points out, traditional reading of stories certainly helps the beginning reader to become familiar with hearing the written language but the act of reading is a visual task and should be presented such that children can both see and hear written language. In one of the few researches carried out with the Big Book, Combs (1987) found that "having the print enlarged served as a concrete focus for the reading act" (p. 426). This is very significant in the light of the short attention span of young children. If the teacher is reading from the normal-sized story book, it would be more difficult to get all the children to focus on the same part of the text at the same time.

3. The Big Book facilitates the use of certain reading strategies such as the think aloud better than normal-sized books. The enlarged texts allow the students to follow exactly what the teacher is modelling - her thinking process, her attempts at getting meaning from print as well as correct phrasing and chunking.

4. Awareness of the conventions of print seems to be readily available through the Big Book. The enlarged size facilitates tracking of print which in turn helps children to get a sense of directionality of written speech as well as the match of speech to print better than with normal-sized books.

5. Apart from everything else, the very size of the Big Book makes it a novelty which would attract young children's curiosity as well as sustain their enthusiasm.

Thus it appears that not only anything that can be done with a traditional story book can be done better with a Big Book, but also in a more meaningful and enjoyable manner.

The Big Book in the ESL Classroom

The increasing use of the Big Book as an approach for reading instruction in the second language classroom is no doubt a reflection of its popularity in the first language (L1) situation. Though most of what has been discussed of the Big Book approach would be applicable to the second language (L2) situation, some of the circumstances would, of course, be different.

The most obvious difference is the limited verbal ability of the majority of the L2 learners in English. This does not neccessarily mean that the L2 learners will have to first acquire proficiency in the oral language before reading and writing can be introduced. Even with L1 learners, such an outdated notion has been replaced with the view that "the language processes - listening, speaking, reading and writing - develop in an interdependent manner" (Strickland, 1990:20). In fact research findings reviewed by Hudelson (1984) conclude that "ESL learners are able to read

English before they have complete oral control of the language" (p. 224) and that "even children who speak no or very little English are reading some of the print in their environment and are using that reading to increase their English" (p. 222). Since each of the language processes support and inform each other, the idea is to immerse the child in a literacy-rich environment so that learning can occur naturally. What better way is there to motivate a child to want to learn another language than through an approach that makes reading functional and therefore irresistible - all children love a good story. As Dixon (1984) puts it the best method for children to learn about the conventions of the written language is through appreciation of the stories, songs, nursery rhymes and poems which are made visible and shared by experienced readers.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of L2 learners of English come from homes which are not rich in 'English' print and thus these children would seldom have experienced the benefits of shared reading. Using the Big Book approach in the ESL classroom is an excellent way of making up for this 'lost' experience.

Another attractive feature of the Big Book is that it lends itself more readily to being self-produced by children. This would be a bonus in the ESL classroom because it will overcome the problems of availability of suitable material as well as the cost factor. In addition stories which are written in English can be adapted to

suit local conditions - "The Three Little Pigs" can become "The Three Little Goats" in an Islamic environment or the Little Red Hen can make "roti canai" (a kind of bread cooked on the griddle) out of the wheat flour instead of bread! Another source can be the children's favourite stories in their first language. These stories which can be easily translated into simple English by the teacher would give the children a sense of familiarity with the otherwise 'foreign' material.

Finally, some adaptations in the actual use of the Big Book would be necessary in the ESL classroom. In the early stages, children who are not very fluent in English should not be prevented from using their first language for asking questions, making predictions or for engaging in general discussions. By the same token, accuracy need not be overemphasized at this stage. Eventually the exposure afforded by the Big Book approach will enable the L2 learners to acquire enough fluency to use the English language confidently.

Conclusion

Cassady (1988) compares the experience of hearing and seeing a Big Book being read aloud to sitting 'downfront' at the movie theatre - the child tends to become so involved in the action that he may forget that it is a formal teaching situation. The Big Book approach attempts not only to teach various reading strategies and

concepts about print but also to impart them in a manner that it is meaningful and interesting to the young learner. The approach has shown to work effectively in the L1 classroom; there is every reason to believe it will work as well in the L2 context.

Bibliography

1. Allington, R.L. (1983) The Reading Instruction Provided Readers of Differing Abilities. Elementary School Journal,83, 548-559.

2 Ashton-Warner, S. (1963) Teacher. New York, NY: Simon Schuster.

3. Cassady, J.K. (1982) Beginning Reading with Big Books. Childhood Education, 65, 18-23.

4. Combs, M. (1987) Modeling the reading process with enlarged texts. Reading Teacher, 40, 422-426.

5. Dixon, B. (1984) Reading: Mysterious or meaningful beginning? Reading, (United Kingdom Reading Association) 18, 168-172.

6. Durkin, D. (1966) Children who read early. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, Columbia University.

7. Holdaway, D. (1979) The Foundations of Literacy. Sydney, Australia: Ashton Scholastic.

8. Hudelson, S. (1984) Kan yu ret an rayt en Ingles: Children become literate in English as a second language. TESOL Quarterly,18, 221-38.

9. Samuels, S.J. (1979) The method of repeated readings. Reading Teacher, 32, 403-408.

10. Slaughter, J.P. (1983) Big Books for little kids: Another fad or a new approach for teaching beginning reading? Reading Teacher, 36, 758-761.

11. Strickland, D.S. (1988) Some tips for using big books. Reading Teacher, 41, 966-968.

12. Strickland, D.S. (1990) Emergent Literacy: How young children learn to read. Educational Leadership, 18-23.

13. Strickland, D.S. & Morrow, L.M. (1990) Emerging readers and writers: Sharing Big Books. Reading Teacher, 43, 342-343.

14. Trachtenburg, P. & Ferruggia, A. (1989) Big Books from little voices: Reaching high risk beginning readers. Reading Teacher, 42, 284-289.